

VIRGINIA HAMILL BIDDLE

Interviewed by: Jewell Fenzi

Interview date: October 28, 1998

Q: This is Jewell Fenzi on Wednesday, October 28, 1998. I am interviewing Virginia Biddle to record memories of her friendship with the Franco Fenzis during her tour in Palermo, Italy, in the late 1950s. Franco Fenzi was my husband's uncle, and Ernestina, Terezina, and Francesca Fenzi, also mentioned in Mrs. Biddle's letters to her sister, are my husband, Guido C. Fenzi's, first cousins. A transcript of the interview will be sent to the oral history program at the National Foreign Affairs Training Center, Arlington, Virginia. Mrs. Biddle is 94.

BIDDLE: I want to show you a picture. It's absolutely adorable. I had it in an envelope and I left it in the envelope and I stripped my album. I went through my album and it almost fell apart with age, you know. I found these. They were pasted in but I got them out. And I had them ready to bring to you and I think you'll love it! That is Mr. Fenzi and Francesca. Isn't that precious?

Q: Isn't that sweet? Oh, it's Ernestina!

BIDDLE: Ernestina, yes!

Q: Nineteen fifty-seven. Isn't that sweet?

BIDDLE: I don't know whether that's Ernestina or is that the other girl?

Q: Well, it looks like Ernestina.

BIDDLE: Well, I've got Ernestina on the back.

Q: Yes. It looks like her.

BIDDLE: And I suppose it is, but I wasn't sure. We'd gone on a picnic. This isn't a good picture, but it's supposed to be Mr. and Mrs. Fenzi.Franco. At least I got the first name "Franco."

Q: Yes, yes.

BIDDLE: Well, my dear, I've got it all written up now. It's in my memoirs. [laughter] Aren't they sweet pictures?

Q: They're very sweet pictures. And they're thirty-one years old. Isn't that something?

BIDDLE: Isn't that something? When I began to think how many years ago all this happened...Do you want me to read you about Mrs. Fenzi?

Q: All right.

BIDDLE: With a pencil I made a list. These are the pages where she's mentioned, and let me get my glasses on. Such a thrill to go over this and bring back these memories because lots of these things I'd forgotten. Of course, I thought of you and I thought, oh, won't she be thrilled! [laughter]

Q: Yes, it's wonderful.

BIDDLE: It was such an unexpected thrill because I didn't realize, you know, that I still had this Palermo chapter. I must have put it aside when I started doing my one on Bangkok because actually, I went to Bangkok and then Palermo; and I must have done Bangkok, sent it in [to the Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training], and they sent it back to me; and then I realized that I wanted to add more notes. So that's what I've been working on. I've been doing that for so long. I told you how embarrassed I am about it all, having waited so long to turn it in. But I kept thinking of things to say that I thought would improve it.

Q: I talked to Stuart Kennedy the other day and he said he's still waiting for it. [laughter]

BIDDLE: I wanted to ask you about that, too, if you've spoken with him. Do tell me what you said and what he said.

Q: I said I was going to do an interview with you, and he said, "How splendid! He said, Also ask her how she's coming with her correspondence." [laughter]

BIDDLE: Well, that's the main thing, of course, of his interest; and he was so kind. Well, anyway, let me...

Q: What was your first post?

BIDDLE: My posts were...

Q: In sequence.

BIDDLE: Sequence, that's it. Bermuda, Tangier, Paris, Bangkok, Palermo, Stockholm, Istanbul, and then the Office of Protocol.

Q: What a marvelous selection of posts!

BIDDLE: I pulled out something for you just as a little profile. That appeared in our Georgetown Quarterly several years ago.

Q: Is that the newsletter here?

BIDDLE: Yes, that's a copy of what appeared in the Georgetown, and it gives you a very brief idea of the sequence and the odyssey of my Foreign Service. Read it, if you like, now. You'll have an idea, just an idea.

Q: You called on the American consul in Bermuda. Did you know him?

BIDDLE: No, I'd never been to Bermuda, and I knew that when you go to a foreign country you call on the consul. You do that in any foreign country. It was habit.

Q: Right.

BIDDLE: Well, it was after the bombing of Pearl Harbor, you see. I was in the bombing of Pearl Harbor.

Q: You were in Hawaii at that time?

BIDDLE: Oh, yes, I was living in Honolulu. Then we were bombed. So I left about...Oh, all of that's quite a story. I have a little book I wrote about it. Well, there's so much to tell you to give you a background of everything.

How it all happened was that I was living in Honolulu for about seven years. I loved the islands and that was one reason I went there, and I did know friends there. Then, of course, we were bombed. I had already booked passage, though, before the bombing because I had a feeling something was going to happen from different angles, and so I thought, well, if there is anything serious, there'll be a stampede at the steamship office and I'd better book for the mainland and so I did, [book passage] on the "Coolidge" coming up from the Orient. December, I guess it must have been. This was, of course, back in 1941, wasn't it?

Q: Yes.

BIDDLE: Then, of course, we were bombed, and nobody knew what happened to the Coolidge because it had zigzagged down and around to the Philippines and then was late coming in.

Q: This was your ship, the "Coolidge," that you were going on.

BIDDLE: Yes.

Q: Oh, I see. All right.

BIDDLE: So I didn't know if they'd take me or not because I knew they'd take the wounded. I was prepared then to ask if they'd take me as a nurse's aide. Anyway, I was going home on the bus one evening when I...Oh, I've got it all written up. It's all written up in a little book about how I happened to...I was taking, in the springtime, Red Cross lessons. Then when the bombs fell, I saw two of my friends when I rushed out to buy a paper. They said, "Oh, our first aid station is being set up over at the Royal Hawaiian Hotel." So I rushed over to join the mobilization. The Royal Hawaiian was only a step from where I was living in my little house.

Do you know the island, Oahu?

Q: Yes, I lived in Honolulu for a while. Yes, I know exactly what you're talking about.

BIDDLE: Waikiki.

Q: Yes.

BIDDLE: You know where Gump's was. Well, I lived kitty-cornered from it. And it was a tiny little place I fixed up 'üz 1/2 la Tahitian after I'd come from Tahiti because that gave it a little cachet. [laughter] It's easier to talk now because you understand what I'm saying.

Q: Yes, and I was just in Hawaii last year.

BIDDLE: Oh, really!

Q: Yes, on Oahu and Maui.

BIDDLE: My dear, you like it, too, didn't you?

Q: Oh, yes!

BIDDLE: I loved it. Well, I rushed over to the Royal and signed up. They gave me an armband and said, "Come back at three o'clock." I had a job then at the newspaper office. Not that I was a newspaper woman, but I had a job in the cashier at the Star Bulletin.

I was trying to explain about that ship. I was coming home on the bus from my job and that ship came alongside. You know how it does. Everybody wondered what it was because it was all blacked out. I knew it. I knew it. I recognized it because I had gone to the Orient on her the year before. Anyway, I dashed down to the steamship office the next morning. When I walked in, before I said anything, the girl there said something about no space, only taking the wounded. "Anyway," she added, "I suggest you wait for the agent." Of course, I did; and he said, "Do you want your ticket?" And I said, "Do you mean to say I can have it?" And he said, "yes, board the ship; she sails without notice;" and handed me the ticket! So I rushed home. I was mostly packed; but then I realized my Japanese laundress hadn't returned my laundry. She always brought it to me, but they were rounding up all the people they feared were fifth column people, and she was afraid to come out! So I had to go and find her.

Well, I did, and I saw my laundry hanging on the line. I put it all in a paper bag and dashed to the ship. We went out in a convoy. I wrote it all up. What a sad, happy departure that was, so unlike any other from that lovely island famous for its sentimental strains of "Aloha" and fragrant leis. Nothing like that. Nobody allowed on the pier to wave goodbye. But I'll show you that little book I wrote, maybe.

I came to Washington because Mildred, my married sister, was living here in Georgetown, and plunged into war work. Then I was working for the Russians and taking Russian lessons as well as doing nurse's aid work in the evenings at the hospital.

Q: How did you happen to be working for the Russians?

BIDDLE: Well, it just happened to be a job. I just took anything that presented itself.

Q: Was that at the Russian embassy?

BIDDLE: Yes, I think it was. No. Purchasing Commission. That was it. It was the Russian Purchasing Commission, and we were working on the manifest. We were all palsy-walsy then, you know. Sending things, helping out.

After the war was over, my darling brother-in-law died. Jim Trimble, my sister's husband. He had cancer. In the meantime, I had several jobs really during that period; and one job was at a girls' boarding school down in Florida. Someone wanted to know if I'd like to go to Florida for the winter. There was a job opening [laughter] at a girls' boarding school in the old Rockefeller estate in Orlando. I went there for that period. Then when summer came I got a job up at Lake George, at a hotel. Oh, I'll never forget hearing Chopin being played on those tourist boats when I was getting news that my brother-in-law was dying. That was a sad period.

Finally, my sister called and said, "It's the end now." So I hurriedly came and he was then at the hospital that is now the Russian compound. It was St. Albans hospital before the Russians took it over. Poor dear Jim. At first he didn't know I was there. Then Mildred and I kept saying, "Jim, Virginia's here." We tried to let him know that I was there. Finally, he just smiled a faint smile, "Oh, hello. How are you?" That was the last word he said. He died on his birthday, eighth of September 1945.

I was terribly sad about that because I adored my brother-in-law. Anyway, I stayed on. That was September, and I stayed on through January. Then on one very cold, snowy day, I booked passage for Bermuda because I missed the palm trees in Honolulu. So I thought, well, I'll go to Bermuda. So I got on a ship and went to Bermuda. I was armed, though, with a lot of letters of introduction.

So I called on the consul because I knew that was just what I should do, and he was a charming gentleman, Clay Merrill, a fatherly type in tweeds. I was just sitting there calmly chatting, and I just said very casually, "I think I'd like to find a job." And he said, "Can you type?" "Oh," I said, "Yes, I can type."

Then, I had a letter from my sister's father-in-law, who was the Honorable South Trimble, who was Clerk of the House for forty years and had written me a nice letter of recommendation if I ever wanted to look for a job. I said to Mr. Merrill, "I have a letter here from the Honorable South Trimble. Would you like to see it?" And he said yes; so he did. He looked at it and I thought he'd never look up again. He just pored over that letter, only a few lines, but they were nice things, you know. [laughter] Anyway, he finally said, "See my secretary". So I went in to see the secretary and she ironed out a salary for me, and I was launched then into the Foreign Service, of which I knew nothing, absolutely nothing! [laughter] But I had a job! I did have an offer of another job somewhere, but I thought, Oh, well, this one sounds like it might have a future. Little did I know! [laughter]

Anyway, I started by relieving the colored messenger boy as a receptionist! [laughter] I was staying in the lovely home of a Bermudian family and I wheeled down on my bicycle every morning with some violets which I put into the empty inkwell to cheer up the applicants when they came in. [laughter]

And then I pored over that manual, that great big, black manual, telling me what it was all about. Well, it was a small staff, and so I was then placed into the passport section occasionally, or the visa section, or whatever there was to do; so I got a general idea of the whole office. I was fascinated by the work and stayed late at night working very hard.

About a year and a half later, I think, I was due for a leave and went to America with one suitcase. When I walked into the State Department, these girls got up and said, "Why we thought you were in Quito!" I said, "Quito! Where's that?" And they said, "Well, your orders must have passed you on the way!" We were going by ship everywhere then. So I said, "Well, for goodness sakes!" [laughter] Then they said almost rapidly, "You'll have to take a test!" I said, "A test? Why?" They said, "Because of the altitude."

So I took the test, and they said I passed it, but I turned blue. So they said, "Now we're going to send you to a lovely place on the Mediterranean." I said, "Where's that?" The answer was Tangier, Morocco. That sounded better. Mildred and I got down all the National Geographics of that other place, Quito; and I thought to myself, Well, I don't like all those women with derby hats on anyway! [laughter] Then we put those away and got down ones on Tangier that night. Then I said, "Well, I have to go back to Bermuda. I only came with one suitcase." They understood that and, of course, said yes.

So I went back. I kept waiting and waiting and waiting for my orders, and finally, I wrote a letter. And I thought, well, I had the nerve to do that at that early stage of my career. [laughter] I wrote directly to the girl in charge of personnel, I guess, and told her that I had been waiting some time and wondered if perhaps I could come to Washington and work at the State Department and be doing something there until I could get passage. Back came a telegraphic reply: Be on the "Mauritania" on such-and-such a date. So they had booked me immediately after they got my letter, on the "Mauritania." My goodness, that proved something!

Anyway, I got there and got on the "Mauritania" and found myself sitting at the same table with the Duke and Duchess de Richelieu. [laughter] My sister had come to see me off and introduced me to some senator or somebody. So after the ship sailed, sitting at dinner with the Duke and Duchess de Richelieu and another lady-I didn't know, of course, who they were at that moment. Then when this senator came over from the captain's table to introduce his wife to me, I had a few words with her and off she went. So I turned to this little man, the Duke, not knowing who he was, really, and I said, "I'm sorry I couldn't introduce you, but I didn't know your name." And he said, "Richelieu." "Oh," I said, "the Duke de Richelieu?" "Yes!" was his reply. And that was his wife. The woman sitting to my right, who happened to be called Mrs. Wolfe, sputtered away in French to him when she heard who he was. She hadn't know either because we were all just aboard. [interruption]

Well, anyway, dear, let me get on with this because I've got a lot to show you.

Q: I know you do. We have all afternoon.

BIDDLE: Well, that's good. I'd like to get the background clear.

Q: Yes.

BIDDLE: Now let me just try and get on with it.

Q: The woman was speaking in French to the Duke.

BIDDLE: Oh, yes. Yes, yes. The duchess then took me out on the deck after dinner and walked around and she explained to me why she sputtered French so excitedly to her husband. She said, her husband...

Q: Mrs. Wolfe's husband.

BIDDLE: ...had gone to see the Duke the night before he committed suicide. Mrs. Wolfe, of course, never saw him again, and wondered what had transpired between her husband and the Duke. That's why she got so excited and wondered, then ... I guess she was asking him about that matter. I think there must have been something happening at that time. That was nineteen, oh, dear, forty-seven, I think. I don't know. I never heard anything more after that.

Q: So you were on your way to Tangier.

BIDDLE: So I was on my way to Tangier and I had to wait in France, in Paris, for a visa because there was something...I guess Tangier was Spanish. Something had to happen that they weren't giving visas to Americans. But I was having a good time. I didn't care. I was just waiting for them to do something.

Q: [laughter] You were in Paris.

BIDDLE: I was in Paris. Finally, they called from the embassy and said, "Would you mind going to Marseilles and taking a ship?" I said, "I don't mind. I'm just waiting for you to do something with me." So they sent me, then, to Marseilles, and I was put on this ship and found that there was our new minister to Morocco. He said to me, "Well, how on earth were you able to get on this ship? I have been trying to pull all kinds of wires to get aboard!"

Q: He finally succeeded. [laughter]

BIDDLE: The minister! [laughter]

Q: Who was that, then? What was his name?

BIDDLE: [Edwin A.] Plitt. Did you know him?

Q: No.

BIDDLE: He was nice. He married a Frenchwoman and then had a son who was a very haughty type. Anyway, there we were on this same ship.

When we arrived in Tangier, of course, the whole embassy was there to meet him. No, it was a legation. I waited a little until he got off in all his glory. [laughter] Then the son and I walked down the gangplank together. That was that. [laughter]

Q: You enjoyed Morocco?

BIDDLE: Oh, I loved it!

Q: Wasn't it wonderful? Yes.

BIDDLE: I loved all my posts. You'll see from this how I enjoyed everything. I just went wherever they sent me, and I was lucky.

Q: Oh, and you were in the old legation building that is now the museum! I know that building.

BIDDLE: Now they've made a museum out of it.

Q: Yes, yes.

BIDDLE: And Mr. Dixon of our church...

Q: Ben. Ben Dixon. He was consul general in Tangier when my husband was at the embassy in Rabat. So we knew Ben and Frances Dixon very well. Yes.

BIDDLE: Well, I've known him from my church.

Oh, dear. There are so many angles we could talk about!

Q: Yes, yes!

BIDDLE: This is what I thought you would be particularly interested in. Did you know anyone at all in our consulate in Palermo?

Q: No, I didn't. Never. We only visited Italy because, as you know, in those days they wouldn't let my husband go to Florence.

BIDDLE: I've been longing to hear about your husband. It was he who was in the Service, of course.

Q: Yes. Yes.

BIDDLE: But he was Italian, wasn't he?

Q: No, he was born in Santa Barbara. His father was a young boy when he came over from Florence. I think he came at eight or nine.

BIDDLE: So he was a natural born American.

Q: Yes. So Guido is American. Yes, he was born here, but they wouldn't send him to Italy when we came into the Foreign Service in 1956.

BIDDLE: They were touchy about those things.

Q: They were very touchy about that. Had we gone to Florence where his family was, it would have been a glorious, immediate entry into Florentine circles. But they wouldn't do that in those days.

BIDDLE: I wonder why.

Q: Well, they were afraid you would give all of your cousins visas to the United States and things like that.

BIDDLE: What?

Q: That you would give all of your family visas to the United States, and you would show favoritism.

BIDDLE: Oh, that sort of thing. But that was wrong thinking.

Q: Of course it was. Of course it was wrong thinking.

BIDDLE: Oh, my dear.

Q: What did you do at most of your posts? I see you were protocol.

BIDDLE: That's a terribly long question. [laughter]

Now, I have to say a little more to explain where we are, and that's why I had the previous page. That's it. I understand myself now. May I start now?

Q: Yes, please do.

BIDDLE: You wanted to tape this.

Q: Yes.

BIDDLE: This is what you should be taping. I'm quoting now from a letter that was one of the many letters that I wrote to my sister from Palermo. This is an excerpt from one of the letters which mentions Mrs. Fenzi.

"When I returned to the consulate, everyone was busy making our office as presentable as possible for the visit of Ambassador Zellerbach. I rushed out and bought three fuschia plants for our balcony and was pleased when Mr. Auchincloss and Mr. Menninger, the supervisory consul at the embassy in Rome, remarked about them. Three hundred invitations had been extended to the Italians for the reception held in the garden of the Villa Igea, which had the right note of grandeur. Many of the aristocracy who came bore some of the proudest names of Sicily. Mr. Auchincloss introduced Count Ferraro, Prince Merto, and Prince Gangi. As we were all standing together, speaking French, Mrs. Fenzi came up and said, 'Mrs. Biddle is the most charming person in Palermo!' I felt suddenly flattered by such a gracious compliment and thought what a charming person she was to pay me such a spontaneous compliment, especially in the presence of Prince Gangi, as I had heard the ladies of the Gangi family were reported in every generation among the most ravishing in Palermo! And the Palazzo Gangi in via Magueda had a long, romantic history."

There's more. Now this is at Taormina when there was a carnival.

"The hotel is filled. Mrs. Fenzi from Palermo is here to see her cousins, the Copelands. Mrs. Copeland had been a former member of parliament and a great friend of Winston Churchill. She is quite elderly, and her husband nearly blind. We all piled into a tiny taxi and went together to Culver Sherrell's party, which was very gay. Mr. Keeley, the consul general, was there as a sheik, his head bound up in a Turkish towel and a whisk broom sticking up in front with some pearls hanging over his forehead. I met quite a few interesting people including Eugene Bonner, whose book, Sicily Roundabout, I had just bought the day before and was told it was completely sold out in America. We met at the piazza for tomato juice the next morning, where he autographed it for me. It is the place where somehow or other everybody manages to find themselves between twelve and one to pass the time of day, make engagements, or amuse themselves in general. Mrs. Fenzi asked me to sit with them at an excellent place to watch the floral parade. The streets were strung with lights. There was a treasure hunt by car and people were dashing all over, the treasure being 60,000 lire. From our balcony we could watch people from all over the country parading the streets, throwing confetti at one another, blowing trumpets, clowning, joking, laughing and shouting. The carnival spirit was contagious; so we joined the fun by throwing down paper streamers at the passing flood of participants."

Q: Lovely! This is marvelous!

BIDDLE: "I often went on picnics with the Fenzis. I loved being with them. One Sunday we drove along the beach and picnicked among the wildflowers which we picked later. On that day, Mrs. Fenzi, Peggy, had on a stunning Shetland wool suit. She said she had bought the material in Scotland and had Mussolini's tailor make it. He admitted he never tailors for women, but as his son went to school with her husband's nephew, he did it as a favor."

Q: Husband's nephew. I wonder which nephew that would have been.

BIDDLE: "Mrs. Fenzi, who knows everybody, [laughter] told me an interesting little anecdote about the Niscemi family. Prince Niscemi's mother was lady-in-waiting to the queen of Italy at one time, now the Queen Mother. When the prince was a young man, the Queen of Rumania had been invited to stay with them. She did not want to be entertained by the nobility, but asked to have the mafia invited. They were invited, but all came heavily armed and were asked to leave their arms below stairs. Then they danced and had a wonderful time."

"The evening of their cocktail party, Lottie and Joe Kyle called to take me to their palace. It was like evoking the times of princely splendor in Sicily as we ascended the long, winding marble staircase laid with red carpet. The dining room was decorated with coats of armor and all around the upper walls were paintings of the various kings of Italy. One of the daughters who was showing us around pointed out paintings of two kings and then added, 'And that is the bust of Grandpa Hirsch in the center.' The Prince had married a Hirsch from Philadelphia. Then we were then shown the bed where Lord Nelson had slept and a few more rooms where there were treasures worthy of the Louvre and eventually came out onto the terrace where Prince and Princess Niscemi were receiving. When I said, 'Good evening, Prince Niscemi,' he quickly said in a friendly way, 'Call me Conrad,' as he was apparently known to his friends as a naturalized American."

I felt Mrs. Fenzi had launched me into Sicilian society.

Q: How very nice! [laughter] How very nice.

BIDDLE: I think there's one more excerpt. [Page] 178. This is the last one.

Q: When was this that you were in Palermo? In the '50s?

BIDDLE: Forty-seven.

Q: The photograph was 1957.

BIDDLE: Oh, well, then, it was '57. Q: That's what the photographs say on the back.

BIDDLE: I was there two years.

Q: They all say 1957. It must have been the same.

BIDDLE: This is the last...Here it is. This is when I was in Rome. I was the last to come to Rome during the Suez crisis to help with the evacuees, and so I was over in Rome.

"Mrs. Fenzi had come over to Rome to see her daughter for a few days and it was good to see her and have news from Palermo. I had experienced one prolonged, interesting break in the routine of office work in Palermo, but now look forward to returning to my little house and garden and Pina."

I had this nice maid, Pina, who I actually took to Stockholm later. When it came time for me to be assigned somewhere else, she said, "Signora, I'll follow you anywhere but darkest Africa."

Q: [laughter] That's sweet.

BIDDLE: So when my orders came that I was going to Stockholm, I thought, Oh, poor Pina, she won't like that cold country. But she loved it and they all loved her.

Q: Interesting. [Reading Biddle's words] "Then came an amusing invitation from Culver..."

BIDDLE: Oh, Sherrell. Isn't that it? He was a charming man who had a beautiful house in Taormina. And there's a place there [in her writing] that says that the ambassador then in Rome was Clare Booth Luce who said, "The only two things to see in Taormina are Culver Sherrell and the Greek theater." [laughter] And I said, "Well, yes, but you can see the Greek theater once, but you can go back and see Culver Sherrell several times." [laughter] And I thought I made a rather good pun. [laughter]

Q: I think so, too! [laughter] Now you didn't read this. Can I read it?

"Mrs. Fenzi and I went to see the film 'Sayonara' together, and she was a wonderful person to see it with, for she told me she had visited Japan in 1921..."

BIDDLE: Oh, yes!

Q: May I continue reading?

"...when her Italian brother-in-law was naval attaché½ at the Italian legation. It was at the time the then Prince of Wales made his first visit and she attended all of the elaborate functions given in his honor. Ernestina, her daughter, was then only four years old with flaming red hair which was such a curiosity that the Emperor turned and stared and stared at her when passing in a procession." Well, that's interesting.

BIDDLE: I'm sorry I missed that.

Q: No, that's all right. We got it.

BIDDLE: She was a very interesting person. I loved Mrs. Fenzi. Now I must find out the exact relationship.

Q: Franco is my husband's uncle, was my husband's uncle.

BIDDLE: Oh, now, let me write it down.

Q: Right. And here I see Mrs. Whittacker.

BIDDLE: Well, now, wait a moment. Franco Fenzi...

Q: ...is my husband Guido Fenzi's uncle.

BIDDLE: That's it.

Q: May I read this, too?

"I invited them to luncheon the following Saturday with Miss Whittacker, who stepped out of her liveried chauffeur driven car bearing the most gorgeous bouquet of amaryllis lilies from her enormous garden and I appreciated it so much. After lunch she wanted Mr. Fenzi to take her to the botanical gardens, which I understood was the finest in Europe, where Mr. Fenzi's father was a great horticulturalist." That's right. "In fact, he had written books on the subject. Mr. Fenzi had planted an avocado tree there six years ago and we were all amazed at how it had grown."

BIDDLE: Yes. I don't know how. That's very important because it's a relative of yours.

Q: Yes, yes. Now we have that page, and then we have page 258, which is this one. Now let's see what we have here.

BIDDLE: Did I have that listed in my ... In the front?

Q: Yes, yes.

BIDDLE: Well, I guess I just slipped up on it.

Q: Now here. Niscemi. The Niscemi family.

BIDDLE: I think that's all correct.

Q: Yes. I love the business with the Mafia being invited. [laughter] What next? Oh, [page] 278 now. Oh, this is a marvelous social commentary on social life in Sicily, in Palermo, in the '50s.

BIDDLE: Well, really I found that it was very social. I remember someone remarking when they came to a "cultural" party, I was living in the coachman's house I had fixed up. It was really quite simple, but even the Princess Niscemi remarked about how charming it was and I felt very flattered, especially when she came from a palace. Anyway, someone said, "I've never met so many titled people in one place!" Or something like that. [laughter] But there really were an awful lot of interesting people with titles there whom I mingled with.

Q: They were old Sicilian families.

BIDDLE: Oh, yes. They'd been there all their lives I guess. Of course, I didn't mind where they sent me. I just went wherever they sent me and did whatever I had to do. If it wasn't interesting, I made it interesting. [laughter] Well, I mean, that assignment to Palermo was not very interesting after my glamorous job in Bangkok, but when they asked me to go to Rome to look after the evacuees, that was a real break for me because that was interesting; and I was very grateful for that. I stayed about two months there in Rome during the summer and I could go sightseeing in the evening because I didn't have to work at those hours. So I was able to see quite a bit. I don't know if I'd been there before or not.

Anyway, I really had a fascinating life. I really enjoyed every minute of it wherever I went. I loved it! I just loved it.

Q: Yes, well, I can see that. I can see that. [laughter] And you must have made friends everywhere like you made friends with the Fenzis.

BIDDLE: Well, I did. I made friends with the people of the country. Well, of course, Americans naturally, too; but I found that I was liking the people of the country and we were having interesting experiences because that was to me...I was delighted to be in a foreign country, and I couldn't understand why some people weren't. [laughter]

Q: Well, there really wasn't much point in being in a foreign country if you didn't cultivate the people of the country is the way we always felt.

BIDDLE: Well, yes.

Q: Yes.

BIDDLE: You know, I'm interesting in knowing about this book you wrote. You must have done a lot of research for that book, didn't you?

Q: It took us eight years to do [Married to the Foreign Service].

BIDDLE: Well, you know, or do you know maybe already how I got what's his name, Shue...

Q: Stu Kennedy?

BIDDLE: Yes. [He] asked me for my letters and I had a whole sack of letters that my sister had saved. So I've given him now the letters that I had written my sister from Bermuda, Tangier, Paris. But then I've been poring over Bangkok for ages, and you see, I finished...

Q: Palermo.

BIDDLE: Palermo. Now I have really to do Stockholm and Istanbul.

Q: So you're almost there.

BIDDLE: I'm almost finished. I told him that I was embellishing and he said, "Oh, no, don't do that! Just give me the letters as they are." Well, I just felt that I should improve upon them, especially [because they were] written so long ago. There were lots of things I could add that might improve them. So that's why I kept going and editing them all the time.

Q: Who puts them into the computer for you? Haven't these been put in a computer?

BIDDLE: He has a girl called Ellen Johnson, and she does the ... I guess she puts them in the computer.

Q: Then he sends it back to you.

BIDDLE: Then he sends them back to me to edit them, and then I'm to send them back to him and he sends them to somebody in Massachusetts.

Q: Yes, I know her. Marion Henderson is her name.

BIDDLE: Oh, really!

Q: And then she types the final draft into the computer. Yes.

BIDDLE: And, you know, he said, "If you ever want to have a book, you can do that." But he didn't want me to do anything until the whole lot was given him and it was all finished together. So that's why I haven't been able to finish it because none of it should be finished until the chronologically...

Q: The posts are all done.

BIDDLE: Exactly.

Q: Yes, yes.

BIDDLE: And so I really have been very, very negligent in getting this done; and now, though, I think you've given me...

Q: Maybe this will spur you on.

BIDDLE: You've given me the invisible push to get on with it.

Q: Good. Good.

BIDDLE: And I used to go down every afternoon in the hairdressing salon, because there was a good light there, at two in the afternoon, I made it a point. And I'd have streaks of doing that [editing her letters]. Then I've had streaks of not doing it. So that's been the way it's gone. I had apologized before to them, that is, Stu and Ellen, because they both took me to lunch one day. Oh, now it's been ages ago. When he came he brought me a little plant, and it was so charming, an African violet plant; and then we went off to a nice place over in Arlington and I was so touched. I even wrote him another note after that violet died. It bloomed again on the day I was so saddened by the terrible tragedy of Princess Diana. I wrote him a note and I said that I had loved that plant that he had brought me and that it lay dormant for a while; but then just when I needed it most it bloomed again.

Q: Oh, how kind of you! What a lovely note!

BIDDLE: Well, it meant so much to me because I had felt I had sort of let him down in a way, and that really did help me enormously just to have that dear little plant blooming again just when I was so saddened over that [Diana's death]. I had been to her home in Althorp. My sister and I ... Every summer Mildred took me with her to visit, or study, really, the stately homes. She belonged to a group connected with the stately home...

Q: National Trust?

BIDDLE: Yes. She asked if I'd like to go along with her and I said, "Oh, yes, I'd love to". She paid my way, and so every summer we went to England and visited and studied these stately homes up until her last days.

I don't know why I said all that. Something I had in mind that I was going...

Q: You were talking about Stu Kennedy and getting the letters ready for him, saying that you felt badly because it had taken so long. [laughter]

BIDDLE: Yes, I did. I apologized until I felt it got embarrassing to him!

Q: To him! [laughter]

BIDDLE: And I kept talking about it and not doing it. [laughter] So I don't know now how he feels.

Q: He said he would just like to have the rest of the letters just as they are.

BIDDLE: He's been awfully patient because he said he didn't want me to spend so much time embellishing them and just to get on with it, sort of thing. But not rushing me at all! He said, "That's all right; there's no deadline", which made it very much easier for me. If there's a deadline and breathing down your neck and all that sort of thing ... But there's none of that at all. He just wants me to do it.

Q: He wants you to do it. You must have written your sister every week?

BIDDLE: Oh, my dear, I wrote all the time. I have stacks of letters, and naturally, I want to sort of edit them and not ... I could leave out some things. Now, for instance, this is an example. There's a little more to this, but that's what I separated that had Mrs. Fenzi in it. But that's about all. I've got more than that for Bangkok. Ooh! Bangkok's like that because there was so much of interest there!

The ambassador asked me to look after his protocol matters, and, of course, in that case I was meeting all the VIPs who came and seeing that they were settled in the right hotel and went to Mrs. Peurifoy's at-homes, and I had to arrange the seating for the dinner parties and also they asked me for the American Association every month to arrange the seating for those lunches where there was a speaker always at the Oriental Hotel. So I had to arrange those according to rank. Then, well, all the protocol matters that came up. I found it fascinating. I loved it because I met quite a few interesting people. I met Rose Kennedy, and she gave me a lovely blue Thai silk stole. [laughter] And Perle Mesta because actually, she had entertained my sister when she [Mesta] was ambassador in Luxembourg. Mildred knew the Trumans. I met them, too. In fact, every time I came on home leave, Mrs. Truman had us over for tea. And Mildred's good friend was his secretary, Rose Conway, and she lived in Kansas City. When I'd come on home leave I'd sometimes stay with her and then she would take me out to see Mr. Truman.

Once when I was on my way to Constantinople she [Conway] said, "Would you like to go out and see the library?" And I said, "Ooh, I'd love to!" So she introduced me, then, to the president. He said, "I understand you're going to Constantinople". Or maybe he said Istanbul. I said, "Yes sir." He said, "I wonder if you'd do a favor for me." Well, of course, I said, "Mr. President. I would!" And he said, "I understand that they're unveiling" - or whatever the word was - "one of the mosques there to reveal what it was originally, and I'd like to know more about that." I said, "Yes, sir. I'll find out and I'll let you know."

When I got there I met the very man who was doing it. Just happened. Mango was his name. He was English. And I told him my mission from the President, and he took me out to see it. So I took notes and sent off a letter to him to let him know what he wanted to know.

That was an interesting experience I had with him. And then Mrs. Truman was very friendly. They stayed at Blair House for a while, and we had tea there once. Oh, I know an interesting thing that happened with her.

I was saying goodbye to her and I was off, then, to Paris, and she said, "How are you going to Paris? What ship are you taking?" And I was so pleased I was going on the Ile de France because, you know, usually we have to sail on American flagships. Somehow I was booked on the Ile de France, and I was delighted and looking forward to it the very next day. And I said, "I'm going on the Ile de France tomorrow!" "Oh," she says, "I hear that's on strike. It's not sailing." Well, my dear, my heart sank. Absolutely. I couldn't believe it.

As soon as I got home the telephone was ringing, and it was the State Department saying the very thing that she had just told me. They said, "Do you want to go by ship now, or by plane?" "Well," I said, "I'm all packed to go on the ship!" So they booked me on the Washington, which proved to be not...

Q: Refitted. After the war?

BIDDLE: Yes. [laughter]

Q: So it was like a troop ship!

BIDDLE: Exactly! And then we ran into the pier someplace and got a hole in the ship as we were docking in Europe. It was cold. It was February. I can see those women now. They were immigrants, I guess, who were occupying my room. They were coming away from the dining room table with oranges, putting them in their suitcases. The poor things I suppose were collecting food. Everything about it was...

Q: Probably collecting food for their family in France. Yes.

BIDDLE: So it wasn't the Ile de France trip I had expected! [laughter] But that was something that Mrs. Truman had informed me about and told me before anybody else! [laughter]

Q: What years were you in Bangkok that Rose Kennedy came and Perle Mesta came? What years were those?

BIDDLE: I have to sort of work back. I was in Paris four years, from '50 to '54. Then I went to Bangkok in '54, '55, and '56. That's right.

Q: So Rose Kennedy came before John Kennedy was president, but while he was a senator.

BIDDLE: I have all these lovely letters from her. That proved to be quite an interesting correspondence because what happened ... Oh, she gave me that lovely stole and, of course, I wrote and thanked her. Then I wrote and sent her a Christmas card from Palermo and it had the map of Sicily on it. You know how maps are: they have a pineapple there and a Sicilian cart here and something there on the map. So she sent the card back and drew a circle around the Sicilian cart on the map and wrote, "I saw one of these carts on the mantelpiece at Ambassador Clare Booth Luce's house in Rome, and I wonder if you would please send me one for my granddaughter." She sent me money, always. I wrote back and said yes and sent it to her. In fact, by coincidence, I was telling Prince Niscemi. When he told me he lived in Hyannisport, I said, "Well, you must know the Kennedys." And he said, "Oh, yes!" I said, "Well, Mrs. Kennedy has just asked me to send her a Sicilian cart." And he said, "I'll take it to her." I said, "Thank you very much, but I've just sent it!" [laughter]

Then she wrote again and said it was received with such joy by all the other little children. Would I please send another one? So I did. Then we got rather chummy! [laughter]

Q: Oh, good! [laughter]

BIDDLE: She wrote, "If you're ever on the Riviera in August, come and see us. If you're ever in Chicago, do go and see that big building that Mr. Shriver is in charge of." I guess you know what I mean. [Chicago Trade Mart]

Then she wanted some dolls when I went to Sweden, in their native dress. Always sent money and plenty of money. So I got some and I added a book, too. Maria Shriver was only about eight years old then; so I got a book and these dolls, and that all went off.

Then, when I was in Istanbul I took a trip up the Nile, and I noticed on one of these stops there were some interesting dolls and so I sent some of those!

Then, of course, that dreadful tragedy happened and her son, John, was killed. I was on my way to Istanbul and got off the ship in Genoa to get some shoes at Ferragamo. I got the shoes, and when they gave me my package, these Italian girls in Ferragamo said, "We're so sorry about your president." And I said, "What do you mean?" Then they brought out the newspaper and it was bordered with black mourning bands, and, oh, I just threw myself on the sofa with my package. I couldn't believe my eyes the horrible thing that had happened to the President. I couldn't do any more shopping. I just went back to the pensione where I always stay. The Americans go there and they were all talking about it. I sent her [Mrs. Rose Kennedy] a telegram at once. It was an awful blow.

Q: For everyone. It was for everyone.

BIDDLE: I know. Then I went on to Istanbul. Of course, I was on my way there, and I stopped in Venice to get the ship. I was invited to dinner with some people who lived there, whom I had met on the ship. Of course, we couldn't talk of anything else!

Q: No, of course not. Who was in Istanbul with you at the consulate?

BIDDLE: Mr. Brown. I was there in...

Q: Sixty-two, sixty-three. Yes.

BIDDLE: I was there three years.

Q: Yes. That must have been a fascinating place to be.

BIDDLE: Oh, I did enjoy it enormously. You just walked in the footsteps of the apostles.

Q: Yes, yes.

BIDDLE: Absolutely fascinating country. I enjoyed every place I went and I always took the long way home or the long way back.

Q: We did, too. [laughter]

BIDDLE: Well, I'm interested in knowing about you! You must have had some interesting posts, too.

Q: Well, we'll do that another time.

I Love Islands!

I love islands! I don't know exactly why. Perhaps it is just a feeling I have.

Islands seem detached from the rest of the world. One lives a more natural life, nearer nature, where simple pleasures are heightened. Surrounded by water, islands usually have scenic beauty and often historical interest.

Such was the island of Mallorca off the coast of Spain where I retired in 1966 after twenty years in the Foreign Service and assignments in Bermuda, Tangier, Paris, Bangkok, Palermo, Stockholm, Istanbul, and the Office of Protocol in Washington, DC. Two of my assignments were on islands. I was married in Kobe, Japan, and I also lived for a while in Honolulu, on Oahu.

I was vacationing on Bermuda when I was offered a job in the consulate general, the beginning of my Foreign Service career, and I was on Oahu when Pearl Harbor was attacked on December 7, 1941.

I was captivated by the beauty and history of Mallorca, and especially with Valldemosa in the hills where George Sand and Frederic Chopin spent a winter in a monastery. It is surrounded by a lovely garden where Chopin composed some of his most famous music, and I got to hear concerts played on Chopin's piano.

At certain times of the year, the Spanish royal family came to occupy their summer palace, which was near where I lived. Needless to say, their yacht on the horizon added a great deal of interest to the island! I lived on Mallorca for eighteen years before returning to Washington, DC. Virginia Biddle

BIOGRAPHIC DATA

Spouse: Charles W. Biddle (deceased)

You Entered Service: 1946 Left Service: 1966

Spouse's Position: Banker

Place/Date of birth: Omaha, Nebraska; April 5, 1904

Maiden Name: Hamill

Parents: Harlie and Olivia Hamill

Schools:

Grafton Hall Episcopal School, Fond du Lac, Wisconsin

Briarcliff Girls' School, Briarcliff Manor, New York

Date/Place of Marriage: Kobe, Japan, October 1, 1930

Profession: U.S. Foreign Service

Positions held:A. At Post: Consular and Protocol

B. In Washington, DC: Office of Protocol, Department of State

End of interview